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My daughter played t-ball in our local parks and recreation league last year. Practices, every Wednesday, were organized chaos. Kids were often running in every direction, picking flowers, chasing butterflies, and falling down to roll in the grass every few minutes. I appreciated this disarray for what it was: kids having a venue to be kids. The games, every Saturday, offered a different animal to gape at in wonder. Every player gets to hit the ball, no matter how many swings it takes. Then, when contact finally carries the ball further than five-feet, the player gets to run to first and stand on the base. In t-ball, everyone is called safe even if they were clearly out. This process repeats itself until every player has batted and scored, at which point the teams swap hitter/fielder positions.

One distinctive Saturday a father/coach on the opposing team decided he was “sick and tired” of his team playing this way and demanded what he labeled a “real” game. He was both loud and obnoxious enough to get our father/coach to concede to the demand. Children on both teams, who hadn’t been prepared, were thrown into a state of confusion. Suddenly, they didn’t get to be safe and didn’t get to score. Tears were shed that day. Kids, who had always been tied, always been equal, swiftly became winners and losers. Labaree’s (1997) contentions regarding the various goals of American education reminded me of t-ball.

At one level, there are the t-ball parents who believe that the entire act of t-ball (practice, uniform, game) is meant to prepare children for Labaree’s democratic equality contention. Children are prepared for citizenry by learning key goals: Play together as a team, play fair, do your part for the good of the whole, everyone is equal, etc. These parents want their child to be socialized and ready to interact with other children in a healthy “competitive” atmosphere. Going through the motions of competition is enough for these parents since winning and losing aren’t key points in their lesson.

On another level, there are t-ball parents who symbolize Labaree’s contention of social efficiency. For these parents, t-ball trains their kids to be good little worker bees: Stand where you’re

told, do what you're told, fulfill your job in ways that your ability allows, show up on time and ready to play, etc. I've seen these parents reprimand their children for not following the coach's rules or not playing well. There were many games where I've heard parents tell children that they have to try harder, have to keep their eye on the ball, have to run faster, and have to play better. It's like these parents don't realize that telling their child, "Don't worry Johnny, you'll get better!" is akin to telling Johnny that at this moment he isn't good enough. Winning and losing still aren't key points to this parenting strategy, instead, the parents focus on how well the child played the game.

The final level of "academic t-ball", which connects to Labaree's contention of social mobility, is shown through player selection, team organization, scheduling, snack sharing, etc. In this t-ball league there is a team of nearly entirely Native American children (as the surrounding community has a large Native American population). Other teams balance integration of ethnicity and some socio-economic positioning, while one team, the team many referred to as "Team Abercrombie and Fitch", boast the financially and athletically elite. Listening to the parents of this team chat about these games is interesting. They focus on individual output instead of team effort. "Did you see Johnny hit that ball? He's the best hitter on the team!" Johnny and his parents have then achieved what Labaree explained as an *individual status attainment*. This status attainment then begins to show *stratification* among team Abercrombie by separating the elite into categories as well.

Since I see connections between Labaree's contentions and the world outside the classroom he presents, I appreciate the scope he provides in connecting education to its surrounding society. However, I wonder about the student jockeying for position inside the system. Labaree claims *meritocratic* form is a consequence of the social mobility goal. He goes further in saying that students become worried about winning and losing. However, I think this is a bit assumptive in regards to students.

I've seen students violate this contention from both extremes: the apathetically detached and the critically gifted. In the classroom, the apathy takes the form of the student who doesn't do the work and isn't motivated or threatened by traditional grade-based demands (is this Labaree's meaning of losing?). On the other end, there are the students who grab an assignment with vigor because their interest is peaked and they've become engaged with the concepts provided by the class. For these students, the apathetic and engaged, winning and losing isn't the primary factor. The primary factor is immediacy of need. Is there a reason they have to do it other than winning and losing? If not, call back at another time.

What I'm left with after this reading are more questions than answers. I don't see this necessarily as a schooling issue as much as a society issue clearly exemplified through schooling. Many of the personal and professional settings I belong to show these contentions as well. However, I don't think any of the various settings, including education, clearly define any *singular* contention Labaree presents over another. Instead, I see them as hybrids of his contentions. I've worked in gas stations, casinos, bars, high-schools, and colleges that seem to stratify democratic equality, social efficiency, and social mobility by department, shift, and individual rather than a general labeling of the whole. Schools may use the stratification process to appease their communities without leaving anyone out of the game, but since society is a driving factor behind this "goal" we see the overlapping into non-educational daily life. So, did society cause this in education or did education cause this in society? In the end, be trained, be unique, be special, be elite, be winners, and be losers while (in terms of t-ball) still calling it a tie to avoid hurt feelings.